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The End of the Craftsmen's House

One afternoon, during the last days of February 1943, Gestapo men suddenly burst into the Craftsmen's House. They went up to the furrier Zygelman. After spending half an hour there, they arrested the furrier with his wife and sister-in-law, who had lost her husband during an *akcja* and had, since then, been living with the Zygelmans.

The furrier's dwelling was sealed up and their nine-year-old boy was left alone in the courtyard, without his parents and without a home.

A few days later, it became known that these three people had been shot in the cemetery.

Gestapo men came to the residence on several evenings and took things out of there, until everything had been robbed. No one knew why the Zygelmans had been killed.

This occurrence made a heavy impression on the craftsmen. And, when we found out a few days later that they were planning searches of the homes of all the craftsmen, the panic became even greater.

Hauptmann Degenhardt found out about the panic amongst the craftsmen and had the tailors Gryn and Kac summoned to him. Together with them, he visited a building in the Old Market [*Stary Rynek*], which belonged to the "Aryan side". He explained to them that he had decided to move the craftsmen, from the building at Aleja 14, into this one. He went on to assure them that just as in the previous *akcje*, this new Craftsmen's House would be spared, and that this building would not belong to the "labour camp", so that the German clients should be able to visit it.

The *Hauptmann* and the two tailors immediately allotted a dwelling with a workshop to each craftsman.

When the tailors returned, they told the craftsmen that, while the dwellings in the new building were not actually as comfortable as the current ones, nevertheless the situation would not change in any other way.

As a result of this news, the spirits in the Craftsmen's House became a little calmer and everyone resumed his work as before.

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On 9th March, at six o'clock in the morning, heavy military steps were heard in the courtyard of the Craftsmen's House. Within a few minutes, they were knocking on the doors of all the

Jewish tenants, and two gendarmes entered each dwelling and ordered the owner of the workshop to get dressed and to go down to the courtyard.

The gendarmes already did not leave the dwellings, but began conducting searches.

When the master craftsmen had left their quarters to descend to the courtyard, they came upon gendarmes and Ukrainians holding weapons on the steps, in the corridors and in front of the building.

In the middle of the courtyard stood *Hauptmann* Degenhardt, with policemen and gendarmes. Once all the Jewish masters were standing before him, he addressed them in these words:

“From this day, 9th March 1943, and onwards, the golden times for you, the craftsmen of the building at Aleja number 14, have ended. All of you will immediately move to the ‘labour camp’, where you will live together with all the Jews. I give you twenty minutes’ time to gather your personal clothing and come down to the courtyard with your families. Goods, raw materials, half and completely finished manufactured items are to be left in the dwellings. The keys are to be left, inserted in the locks of the doors and cabinets.”

The *Hauptmann* no longer recognised the tailor Gryn, whom he had made a policeman, nor the other tailor who had visited him along with the tailor Gryn, or all the other craftsmen to whom he had supposedly allocated the new house at the Old Market [Stary Rynek]. *“Alle Juden sind gleich!”* [All Jews are equal!].

He immediately left the building, giving his men the proper instructions as to how to carry through the *akcja*.

The gendarmes waited twenty minutes. They made sure that none of the craftsmen took any goods with them, [but] only their private effects. The craftsmen and their family members loaded themselves with packs over their shoulders and suitcases in their hands and descended into the courtyard. About two hundred people with their few belongings lined up in the courtyard and then began marching through the streets to the “labour camp”. Guarded on all sides by gendarmes and Ukrainians, we were driven through ul. Garibaldiego, where the large warehouses with the robbed Jewish property were located.

The large majority of those expelled were unable to carry their packs for long, because the gendarmes and Ukrainians forced them to walk ever faster and faster. As a result, those who were becoming increasingly more exhausted, continually threw away the loads that had become heavy in the street, and the gendarmes picked them up and carried them into the storerooms.

From ul. Garibaldiego, we were driven down ul. Warszawska, where we did not see a single civilian. There, they were still clearing out the shops after the deported Jews. Only Polish policemen stood on guard and they laughed into our faces at how we were hot from being chased and carrying the loads.

A young man, who had tuberculosis, lived in the Craftsmen's House. He was not carrying any packs, yet he still could not keep up the rapid pace. He was left trailing behind. His wife carried the packs on her frail shoulders and, from time to time, looked at her seriously ill husband. He had a yellowish complexion and continuously held his hand to his heart. The murderers stepped on his feet and drove over him with their bicycles. But he could not walk faster. He was not even able to utter a single word. One of the gendarmes pulled out his revolver and wanted to shoot the young man. But his wife shielded him and began pleading for him that he was ill and could not walk. The gendarme reconsidered [the matter] and relented.

From ul. Warszawska, we entered the Small Market and, from there, the "labour camp". There, we found the alleys completely empty, without people. We were herded into a large hall on the first floor of a liquidated Jewish workshop. Everyone took off their packs and, tired, dropped down on the floor.

The craftsmen looked at one another as though astonished and bewildered. It was difficult to accept that, just a while ago, we had lost our established home. Only now did we work out that all the promises of the German clients and Mrs Moszewicz had been deceptions in order to pull the wool over our eyes— just like the visit of the *Hauptmann* with the two tailors to the supposed new Craftsmen's House. They had been devised so that no one would anticipate [what was about to happen] and carry something out of the dwellings in time.

Meanwhile, several hours passed and we were sitting in a guarded house, not knowing what was going to happen to us.

The *Hauptmann* eventually arrived, accompanied by a fellow from the Gestapo, and called out that the tailor Kac and the cobbler Szydłowski were to descend with their families to the ground floor and take their things with them. This command was obviously carried out immediately.

A few minutes later, Kac's little girl came back upstairs and told us that, downstairs, they were examining the [personal] effects and that everyone had to strip naked for a search.

Everyone in the hall immediately took out their valuables and sought means to get rid of them, because a Jew was not allowed to have any larger sums of money or items of worth.

Seeking an option to aid ourselves, we noticed a small window in the hall, which opened to a narrow courtyard. This yard bordered with another courtyard, where we saw Jewish policemen and night workers standing, who were now gazing up at us. We made signs to them with our hands and made them understand the situation in which we were. Many wrapped their money and valuables in a handkerchief, wrote their name on a note and threw it over through the little window. Those picked the parcels up and left immediately.

But not everyone decided to do so with their money and valuables.

In the meantime, we noticed, through another small window, that the Kac and Szydłowski families had been lined up facing a wall and, after a certain time, they were taken away under a heavy guard of Ukrainians and gendarmes.

Then, everyone on the first floor was summoned to a search. We were taken, one by one, into a room where the *Hauptmann* was with five gendarmes. The *Hauptmann* demanded of each person to hand over everything he had and, only after this had been done, was one searched anew by the gendarmes, in case one had hidden something, Heaven forbid.

After the search, we were let out into the street with our things, and everyone was forced to ask acquaintances for some place where they would allow us to put our things.

In this manner, the *Hauptmann* received two hundred new people into the "labour camp", without money and without a roof over their heads. He, in contrast, came away with a valise of money and items of worth. As it later became known, he had seized 100,000 zloty, besides various valuables.

When the sick young man was searched and the money was taken from him, he was commanded, by the *Hauptmann*, to report to the hospital to a doctor. The young man was admitted to hospital as a seriously ill patient.

On the following day, the *Hauptmann* entered the hospital and found the young man lying in bed, and another seriously ill patient next to him in another small bed. The *Hauptmann* ordered the doctor to poison both patients.

One day later, when the *Hauptmann* spoke on the telephone with his deputy about various matters, he did not forget to inquire as to whether the two patients were already dead. Upon receiving a reply that they were still alive, he issued an order that the Jewish police bring the two patients to the guardroom.

When two Jewish policemen came into the hospital for the patients, everyone understood why there were being summoned to the guardroom.

It became very eerie in the hospital and no one wished to convey the tidings to the sick men and their wives. The policemen ordered the two unfortunates to get dressed and to go with them. They could not tear the wives away from their sick husbands and the patients, themselves, also understood what was going on and they refused to get dressed. With great efforts, the nurses stood them on their feet. One of the women gave her ailing husband sleeping pills [to take] with him. The parting of the two couples was heartrending. The policemen were compelled to separate the people by force, and the two seriously ill patients set forth on their march towards the Angel of Death.

When they emerged from the hospital yard into the street, there was beautiful spring weather. The sun warmed [them] and the two sick men felt better in the open air and did not wish to go meet their death. They sat down on the ground by the gutters and muttered, "We won't go there to be shot".

The policeman and the hospital personnel tried to convince them that they were taking them to be registered for a summer resort for the sick. But the two patients did not let themselves

be fooled. They lay down next to a gate and did not allow themselves to be moved from the spot. One could not fathom from where they had suddenly taken such strength.

Jewish policemen and people of the night shift and of the Craftsmen's House stood at a distance and watched this horrific scene with tears in their eyes. The policemen could not find a way to cope with the two sick men. One of them began shouting loudly – for months, this patient had not been able to utter a word. *"I can live longer!"*, he bellowed in an eerie voice, *"Tell the Hauptmann that I am able work!"*

These horrifying screams echoed over the alleys of the "labour camp" and a shudder enveloped everyone. At that same moment, another shout was heard from afar - "How long will I have to wait for these two crippled *Dreckmänner*¹?"

Everyone looked up and saw the gendarme-*Wachmeister* [constable²] standing at the guardroom in front of the door with two Ukrainians, who were watching the spectacle and laughing loudly.

Terror struck the sick men. One of them hastily took the sleeping pills out of his pocket and swallowed them one after the other. He roared, *"Fall asleep, fall asleep quicker!"*

The two policemen lifted them up from the ground and they walked with downcast heads quietly and slowly to the guardroom.

They were led into the courtyard and, with pounding hearts, we awaited the shots, which were heard a few minutes later.

A while later, the Jewish policeman came back out on their own. They recounted that the sick men were forced to strip naked. The Ukrainians chased them with braided lashes. Each received a shot in the head from behind, and they toppled over to one side, collapsing like felled trees.

Several hours later, the dead bodies were taken away to the Jewish cemetery.

¹ [TN: Ger., "muck-men"; as the reader may imagine, the word "Dreck" can also be translated in a much coarser manner.]

² [TN: This term is sometimes also rendered as "officer", "sergeant" or "Captain of the Guard".]